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United Methodists call for halt to drilling

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GRANTHAM - United Methodists representing 950 churches across Northeastern and Central Pennsylvania passed a resolution calling for a temporary halt in gas well drilling in the Marcellus shale as well as an impact tax on those places where drilling already has taken hold.

The issue dominated about an hour of discussion Thursday at the Susquehanna Annual Conference meeting Wednesday through Saturday at Messiah College just below Harrisburg.

Rosalie Connelly, a lay member from First United Methodist Church of Mansfield made an emotional plea about nonstop gas activity going on within a 5-mile radius of her church, but said it was from what happened to her sister's water supply in Dimock Township that caused her to "really" take notice.

She said her sister's water suddenly turned dark and while Cabot Oil & Gas eventually signed a consent order in the matter, her sister went without drinking water for 10 months.

Connelly asked, "How can we look the other way while companies won't take responsibility for their actions?"

Dan Delp of Grace Church in Shrewsbury rose up against the Marcellus resolution and said as stated, it was missing the facts.

But, the Rev. Diane Bentley of the East Canton Church, whose parish in LeRoy Township, Bradford County, included the April 19 blowout of a Chesapeake well, said companies sometimes say "not to worry when maybe you need to."

She noted that the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection took its own water samples and determined water in a tributary of the Towanda Creek had been contaminated when the industry was saying otherwise.

Karen Weiss, a lay member from St. Paul's Church in State College who is also an environmental engineer, said she had a hand in being part of a design team for a pair of wastewater treatment plants that took fracked water.

She said she was surprised that what chemical compounds some companies said they used in fracking often understated what was actually used.

"We were discovering that the water at the end of the treatment plant's recycling process wasn't as clean as it should have been because other things had been added we weren't prepared for," Weiss said. "That's just not acceptable."

The Rev. Wayne Bender of Shope's Church in Hummelstown said he was disappointed that the Susquehanna Conference was not addressing what he considered more important issues that the Marcellus shale activity had wrought on the region- particularly an influx of new workers coming into the region and what he called the "new homelessness" created because rents were being driven up in certain communities.

But, Joan Carey a lay member from Clarks Summit said she had a Ph.D. in biology, and "the bottom line was that if we don't have clean water, we're done."

During the four-day conference attended by upwards of 1,500 United Methodists about evenly divided between clergy and laity, the body also supported mental health ministries, visioned an AIDS-free world by 2020 and openly discussed sexual ethics and reinforced the church's mechanisms for accountability.

Celebrations also occurred in honor of retiring clergy and in memory of those deceased.

Bishop Jane Middleton presided over the body and in her opening remarks Wednesday said those gathered needed "to stand in the water and choose life."

She said individuals needed to be willing to give up anything that is not essential to their survival and challenged the conference to give up everything that is not essential to its mission "so we may go where God leads."

On Friday, the body voted to cut back on its number of geographical districts from 11 to seven effective July 1, 2012, and reallocate resources that could better be directed at training and deploying transformational leaders.

The body also elected seven laity and seven clergy to represent the Susquehanna Conference at next year's quadrennial meeting of the worldwide United Methodist Church which would be meeting next spring in Tampa, Fla. Among the clergy elected was Scranton District Superintendent the Rev. Beth Jones.

Among the last acts today for the conference that stretches from the Maryland border below York to the New York border just above Great Bend will be an ordination service and the naming of new appointments effective July 1 including the Rev. Jon Buxton moving from pastor of the Moscow United Methodist Church to Wilkes-Barre District Superintendent, where he will oversee around 80 churches.

The Susquehanna Conference includes 160 United Methodist churches in northeast Pennsylvania that until a year ago were in the former Wyoming Conference.

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